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## Children's political geographies

### Abstract

This chapter introduces children's political geographies from three perspectives. The first section discusses children's place and role in political geographical research in general, providing a brief overview of the development that led to the problematization of children's absence as participants from political geographical events, dynamics and power relations. The second section looks into the subfields of children's and young people's geographies and the role of politics in these relatively new research areas, in connection with the interdisciplinary field of childhood studies that provides them a broader social scientific context. The third section considers the geographies of children's politics, portraying major themes that scholars have thus far engaged with in their attempts to make better sense of the political worlds where children's everyday lives are embedded, and where they practice their agencies by mundane and more formal means.

*Keywords:* Children, childhood, youth, young people, political agency, children's geographies, children in politics, political geographies of childhood, youthful politics

### Children in political geography

Children's absence from the concerns of the subfield of political geography has drawn some attention during the past decade or so, and several authors have sought to account for this relative invisibility. Some point at children's marginal position and limited capacities to gain visibility in western societies, which places them into a special position of exclusion (Matthews, Limb and Taylor 1999). Others have emphasized children and young people's liminal position 'in between' competence and incompetence, liability and unaccountability, responsibility and irresponsibility, which tends to obscure children's roles as actors in political analysis (Skelton 2010). Yet another explanation puts the blame on the conventional wisdom according to which children's lives should be

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safe from adult concerns, placing them rather categorically outside the political (Brocklehurst 2006; Kallio and Häkli 2010).

While children's matters have certainly been overlooked by political geographers, there are ways in which children and youth have figured in the subfield. In a *Political Geography Quarterly* editorial comment titled "Children and politics" Peter Taylor (1989) notes, maybe a bit tongue in cheek, that the title evokes images of politicians campaigning and garnering votes by "kissing babies" in order to appear caring and attentive to the most vulnerable of human beings. Yet, he goes on to state that "in recent years children have been entering politics in a completely different manner to appear at the heart of our most important debates" (Taylor 1989, 5). What Taylor refers to is the political geography approach that finds children as victims of war, oppressive societal orders, unfavorable socio-economic circumstances, and natural disasters, or as foci of social policies such as schooling, health care, or participatory practices (cf. Katz 1993; Gruffudd 1996; Wood 1996; Kalipeni and Oppong 1998; Cheney 2005; Mitchell 2006; Barker 2012; Yea 2013). Anticipating what would become a growing area of scholarly interest, Taylor (1989) also envisions a political geography concern with children as active participants in political events and processes, mentioning the uprisings of school children in the West Bank and apartheid South Africa as two examples.

Since Taylor's early observations, a growing political geography literature has emerged focused on children insofar as they are exposed to ideological goals, abuse, armed conflicts, or other grave circumstances. Children have for long been seen as an important segment of the population for ideological or biopolitical interventions with aims that range from spatial socialization into national and/or state subjectivities, to manipulating family and gender structures, building geopolitical and cultural dispositions, or cultivating healthy neoliberal citizens (Bar-Gal 1993; Maddrell 1996; Newman and Paasi 1998; Mitchell 2001; Conlon 2010; Biesta 2012; Martin 2012; Mills 2013; Jackson 2013). The studies of children as implicated in major processes of (geo)political regulation and direction have made it abundantly clear that they are anything but safe from adult concerns. On the contrary,

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the possibility to influence children's growth and development towards adulthood makes them prime targets for the manipulation of the shape of future societies, subjecting them to some very powerful political passions (Gruffudd 1996; Gagen 2000; Wainwright and Marandet 2011).

Another important strand of scholarship approaches children's political geographies from the point of view of socio-economic vulnerability and abuse (e.g. Ennew and Swart-Kruger 2003; Young 2004). There are several countries where it is commonplace for children to participate in the labor force but the conditions in which this occurs vary dramatically from responsible and rewarded contribution to household sustenance to downright slavery in plantations, factories or sweatshops (Robson 2004; Aitken, Estrada, Jennings and Aguirre 2006; Swanson 2009; Jeffrey 2010; Evans 2011). In extreme situations, children are oppressed through practices of human trafficking and sexual abuse (Cream 1993; Kesby, Gwanzura-Ottmoller and Chizororo 2006). While the latter is certainly always injurious to children, the consequences of trafficking are more dependent on contextual factors, such as age, gender, place, poverty, and traditions that shape the conditions in which children are lured or forced to work away from their parents (Manzo 2005; Van Blerk 2008; Yea 2013).

Yet another literature that has relevance to political geography focuses on the ways in which children are victimized by armed conflicts (e.g. Grundy-Warr and Wong Siew Yin 2002). Children's involvement in war is typically approached as experienced directly in conflict societies or indirectly through forced displacement (Kalipeni and Oppong 1998; Lang and Knudsen 2009). Expanding on the social consequences of violent conflicts, studies have also charted the ways in which war distress is memorized in later life or transmitted intergenerationally from parents to children (McDowell 2004; Kuusisto-Arponen 2009). Some work has also been done on the direct involvement of child soldiers in conflicts but there are surprisingly few detailed studies targeting the issue (Cheney 2005; Hyndman 2010).

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As the discussion above indicates, it is possible to pinpoint several examples of scholarship attentive to children's political geographies. Yet it would be an exaggeration to say that even this literature in itself signals extensive interest. We can but agree with Tracey Skelton (2010) who notes, on the basis of a survey on the contents of the subdiscipline's flagship journal *Political Geography*, that the scholarship could focus some more attention to children and young people. To illustrate just how rare it is to find children as key subjects in political geography analysis, we use the remaining part of this section to discuss the treatment of the 2004 North Ossetian Beslan school hostage crisis in an article by Gearoid Ó Tuathail, published in the first issue of the 2009 volume of *Political Geography*. The article is based on the *Political Geography* Plenary Lecture at the 2008 Annual Meeting of the Association of American Geographers, and sets out to develop "a critical geopolitical account of the ways in which key actors involved in the terrorist incident at School Number 1 in Beslan North Ossetia constructed its meaning and justified their actions" (Ó Tuathail 2009a, 4). In the issue the article is followed by three commentaries and Ó Tuathail's response.

Since the hostage crisis took place in a school, it is not surprising that children figure strongly in the tragedy. The crisis demanded the life of 334 hostages, more than half of whom were children who were attending a ceremony with their parents to mark the beginning of the school year. Ó Tuathail (2009a) examines the event from three perspectives: "the terrorist's Beslan", "the Kremlin's Beslan" and "Beslan among Ossetians and others in the North Caucasus" (p.4). Echoing Taylor's (1989) concerns about "children's deaths [as] an unfortunate side effect" of the ways in which our system works, the paper aptly introduces children as victims of the tragedy: as members of the community under siege by terrorists, as hostages whose release was negotiated by the President of Ingushetia, and as human beings who suffered injuries or died in the incident. Children are also portrayed as people protected by the Russian Special Forces, as the subject of concern by the Russian and the North Ossetian president, and as targets of resurrection mobilized by the Mothers of Beslan (Tuathail 2009a, 4, 8, 12–13).

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Despite their focal role in both the public media reporting the events and Ó Tuathail's (2009a) assessment of the incident, children remain surprisingly invisible in the subsequent discussions on the paper. In their commentaries Bakke (2009) and Nickley (2009) refrain from any child-related terminology, whereas Gorenburg (2009) refers to the terrorists as "child killers" (citing Vladimir Putin) and recalls that the attack targeted "innocent schoolchildren". Ó Tuathail's (2009b) response, instead, notes (in passing) that "the life conditions of every Chechen child is constrained by the fact that every Russian child learns Lermontov's poem about a 'wicked Chechen' sharpening his *kinzhal* (dagger)." He makes the point in reference to Åsne Seierstad's (2008) book that places children at the heart of the inquiry into the Chechnya'n conflict, thus offering a potential starting point for 'bringing children in' also as political subjects, not just passive victims. Yet he does not follow this line of thought and, as yet, the dialogue has not prompted further discussion on the Beslan case in the journal or elsewhere within the subdiscipline.

Ó Tuathail's (2009a) analysis of the events that violently drew hundreds of children into the core of a troubled geopolitics is an adept treatment of a complex and multilayered conflict. Yet, it is also an apt example of just how remote the idea of children's agency has been and largely still is to political geographical research, including its critical dimensions. Despite Taylor's (1989) early optimism about children participating in politics in new and remarkable ways, it seems that in political geography scholarship this change has been a slow train coming. Unlike other people, children have typically not been appreciated as agents actively *present* in political events, *operating* in particular ways, and *developing* as political subjects, let alone *creating* political settings, dynamics and practices in their everyday lives, and *involving* other people in these geographies. The traditional political geography approach has afforded children predominantly passive, or at the least non-initiative, roles as members of the political world. Consider again the pages of *Political Geography*: The term 'children's agency' appears for the first time in 2010 in Aspasia Theodosiou's review introducing a book co-authored by Yiannis Papadakis, Nicos Peristianis and Gisela Welz (none of

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whom are political geography scholars). Similarly, vocabulary highlighting children's subjectivity and active political roles can only be found in some recent articles discussing the matter explicitly (Kallio and Häkli 2010, 2011a; Bartos 2012; Wood 2012).

The sea change concerning children's political roles that we are now witnessing has found foothold somewhat earlier in areas of research with less explicit political geographical focus (see next sections). Especially scholarship inspired by feminist and post-colonial theorization has been influential for the study of youthful political agency that has explicitly sought to include into the realm of mundane political agency the hitherto excluded "half of the world's population" (Brocklehurst 2006, 1). In what follows we provide an overview of this development and seek to assess its significance for political geography more broadly.

### **Politics in children's geographies**

The development of political geography research towards acknowledging children and young people as important subjects, agents, and actors was prefaced by more general work in the emerging subfields of children's geographies and geographies of young people since the early 1990s. These interconnected but distinguishable fields have built strong linkages to feminist social and cultural geographies and many of the key concepts, theoretical perspectives and methodological approaches of the early scholarship were drawn from literatures concerning the family, the school, welfare institutions and urban space. Early publications include a discussion series in *Area* with contributions from Sarah James (1990, 1991), David Sibley (1991) and Hilary Winchester (1991), articles in geography journals and books by Cindi Katz (1991, 1993), Stuart Aitken, Joan Wingate and Thomas Herman (Aitken and Wingate 1993; Aitken and Herman 1997), Teresa Ploszajska (1994), Hugh Matthews (1995a, 1995b), Hilary Winchester and Lauren Costello (1995), David Sibley (1995a, 1995b), and Gill Valentine (1996a, 1996b), as well as monographs by Hugh Matthews (1992) and Stuart Aitken (1994), among others.



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This discussion set out to bring to the fore childhood issues and children's matters in geography at large, introducing children and youth as active agents in their lived worlds. The discussion involved perspectives and vocabularies familiar to political geographical research. For instance, ideas from the work of William Bunge (1973), Colin Ward (1977), and Robin Moore (1986) were introduced to draw attention to some fundamental issues largely ignored in the scholarship of the time. Hilary Winchester's comment in *Area* captures the spirit well: "The socio-spatial relationships of children, their dependence on adults, and the power relationships which circumscribe their lives are certainly the most underdeveloped and potentially fruitful area of geographical research" (Winchester 1991, 359).

The positive thrust did not, however, push the emerging field of children's geographies toward explicitly political inquiry. Since the mid-1990s discussions on childhood and youth expanded both in size and scope but politics remained a rather marginal issue. Youthful agency was randomly noticed in the context of policy and children's rights, with Hugh Matthews and Melanie Limb (1999) as the most influential scholars, but any broader assessment of children's place in politics and the place of politics in different kinds of childhoods remained absent. At the same time feminist geography was establishing its position within political geography, exploring various kinds of political processes, dynamics and practices, and expanding the notion of 'the political' to include individual and collective, official and mundane, rational and affective ways of acting and impacting politically (for an overview see Brown and Staeheli 2003). The relative stagnation within children's geographies can partly be explained by the influence of the new childhood studies paradigm that started to direct the scholarly debate from the early 1990s.

Conceptions of childhood have undergone a radical change in the past twenty years. The 1980s was a decade of discursive change in the interlinked yet separate fields of children's rights advocacy and social studies of childhood. During that time the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* was going through an extremely prolonged compilation that resulted in a new agenda of

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children's human rights (Häkli and Kallio 2014a). In its final form in 1989 the treaty introduced the idea of *voice* as a fundamental right of the child, comparable to *provision* and *protection* that form the traditional twosome of children's rights. Simultaneously, a forceful social theoretical critique was launched against adult-centered notions of children's lived worlds that stressed behavior and development over agency and 'being' (e.g. Jenks 1982; Henriques, Holloway, Urwin, Venn and Walkerdine 1984; Adler and Adler 1986; Alanen 1988; Chisholm, Brown, Kruger and Buchner 1990). This critique led to a paradigmatic change, producing an interdisciplinary discussion generally known as the 'new' social studies of childhood. The book *Constructing and Re-Constructing Childhood: Contemporary Issues in the Sociological Study of Childhood*, edited by Allison James and Alan Prout (1990) and published in concert with the Convention, came to manifest the new research agenda.

During the 1990s, the altered human rights frame and the new disciplinary approach were tightly knit together. The emphasis given to the child's right to be heard, combined with the approach stressing children as agents 'here and now', generated a concept that has thereafter dominated both research and policy agendas: *children's participation*. Scholars working in multiple disciplinary fields, children's rights advocates and benefit organizations, professionals working with children and youth, policy-makers and administrative actors seeking 'the best of the child', as well as the media quickly embraced the concept. Human geographers, too, took a new course moving from 'top-down socialization' towards interest in child-centered participation and children as active agents in the worlds where they are situated in particular ways (e.g. Holloway and Valentine 2000). This work took notice of children's agency both in mundane everyday environments and more official arenas, thus covering children's everyday 'political' and formal 'Political' geographies (e.g. Valentine 1997; Owens 1997; Jones 1999). Yet the political aspects of children's agency were not explicitly emphasized, largely because the new childhood studies paradigm affiliated politics chiefly with the adult-led world and thus skirted the theme as contradicting child-centered perspectives.

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A new course emerged by the turn of the century. Two publications with long standing influence in the politically oriented study of children's geographies appeared in 2003. First, *Space and Polity* published a special issue on the *Political Geographies of Children and Young People*, edited by Chris Philo and Fiona M. Smith (2003), based on a conference session 'Politicising Child Life' held at the Annual Meeting of the Association of American Geographers in 2001. Second, the *Children's Geographies* journal was launched as a specific forum for children and young people's geographies. Little by little, discussions concerning youthful political presence in different geographical settings evolved, first in the context of young adults and late teenagers (e.g. Freeman, Nairn and Sligo 2003; O'Toole 2003; Wridt 2004; Cahill 2007; Hörschelmann 2008; Thomas 2008; Skelton 2007; Staeheli and Hammett 2010; Kallio and Häkli 2011b; Azmi, Brun and Lund 2013), but increasingly focusing on younger children as well (e.g. Kelley 2006; Kallio 2007; Lund 2007; Cope 2008; Bosco 2010; Kallio and Häkli 2011a; Mitchell and Elwood 2012; Bartos 2012; Bordonaro 2012; Wood 2012; Marshall 2013).

A productive coupling between the research streams on children and young people has recently resulted in joint conference sessions, edited collections, and collaborative research projects. For example, papers from a session on children and young people's everyday politics at the AAG meeting in 2012 were published as an edited collection (Kallio and Häkli 2013), and a conference session on children, young people and critical geopolitics at the RGS-IBG meeting in 2013, organized by Peter Hopkins and Matthew Benwell, is leading to another edited volume. Also a twelve-volume Major Reference Work is being prepared by Tracey Skelton. With these and many other contributions the discussion on children's politics is moving toward themes and theoretical orientations generally employed in political geography. The concomitant appreciation of children as complete human beings in the political worlds they live in alongside with other people helps to locate 'politics' in children's geographies and 'children' in political geographies. This opens further avenues for an inquiry on the 'geography' in children's politics.

### **Geography in children's politics**

Explicit theorization of the *spatialities* of children's politics may have been overshadowed by the need to justify the idea of youthful realities as *political*, but the consolidation and further expansion of the research area is likely to change the situation as some recent works indicate (e.g. Vanderbeck 2008; Ansell 2009; Kallio and Häkli 2013). However, in empirical terms, certain geographies have received more attention than others during the past three decades, providing fruitful starting points for further theorization and methodological work.

Given that economic geography is one of the last terrains where children's agency is still to gain a foothold, it is interesting that one of the first research streams in children's political geographies has a strong political economic emphasis. Cindi Katz' (1986, 1991, 1993, 2004) longstanding work in rural Sudan and urban New York has paid attention to children's positions, roles and agencies in the world of economic restructuring. Binding together the mundane spheres of work, play, and education with reference to 'knowing' and livelihood as they appear in the multi-scalar world, she has shown how the global time-space compression unfolds in children's lived worlds as time-space *expansions*. Katz' approach has inspired many, and especially scholarship concerning child labor and children's work in underdeveloped and developing regions has taken a political geographical tone (e.g. Robson 2004; Abebe 2007; Dyson 2008; Ansell 2009; Evans 2011). In parallel, Stuart Aitken (1994, 2001) has studied children's livelihoods from a social geographical perspective at the US/Mexico border, contributing to feminist and post-colonial geographies. This work has been extended to various dimensions in the San Diego research group (e.g. Aitken *et al.* 2006; Bosco 2010; Bosco, Aitken and Herman 2011), and elsewhere (e.g. Aitken, Kjørholt and Lund 2007; Forsberg and Pösö 2011).

Another strong research stream targets children's place in public/private space, both in urban and rural contexts, and in the minority and the majority world. Spanning from homes, streets and neighborhoods to various natural and built environments, as well as demonstrations and other semi-formal participation venues, these studies have come to ask what are the 'right places' for children

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and youth and why they seem 'out-of-place' in other locations and events. Sarah Holloway, Gill Valentine and Tracey Skelton have been active in this field at an early stage, emphasizing feminist theoretical perspectives (Valentine 1996b; Skelton and Valentine 1997; Holloway and Valentine 2000, 2001; Valentine and Holloway 2001). Other studies have worked to further broaden the approach (e.g. Tucker and Matthews 2001; Punch 2001; Nairn, Panelli and McCormack 2003; Christensen and O'Brien 2004; Young 2004). The work that links with the 'right to the city' idea is one of the recent openings pertinent to children's political geographies (e.g. Bosco *et al.* 2011; Elwood and Mitchell 2012; Cele 2013).

Perhaps the most explicit political landscape explored by childhood scholars is that of policy-making, especially in relation to democratic practice, political participation, and citizenship. This strongly adult-led arena has been unsettled by the idea of children as full human beings who should have a place in the democratic society alongside with others. Here childhood and youth geographers have largely joined forces, making space for the idea that membership in a political community – be it of any scalar extent – is not a question of age. Tracey Skelton (2010) has written extensively on the matter, with a serious attempt to *spatialize* children's participation in-between the mundane and the official political realities (also Skelton and Valentine 2003). Also Hugh Matthews and Melanie Limb (1999), Suzie Weller (2003), Barry Percy-Smith (2006), Janet Habashi and Jody Worley (2008, 2014) and Kirsi Pauliina Kallio and Jouni Häkli (2011a) have sought to unpack various aspects of children's societal agency and belonging, and this work has been further developed by scholars such as Ann Bartos (2012, 2013), Bronwyn Wood (2012), and David Marshall (2013).

Research on children's participation is closely linked with the question of the rights of the child that has received considerable attention among geographers (e.g. Lund 2007; Skelton 2007; Ruddick 2007a, 2007b; Kallio 2012; Häkli and Kallio 2014a), not to mention more explicit discussions concerning citizenship (e.g. Cope 2008; Driskell, Fox and Kudva 2008; Pykett 2009; Staeheli and Hammett 2010; Kallio and Häkli 2011). Many of these studies resonate with political geography

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research that approaches the school as an institution reinforcing particular kinds of citizenships, and as a space of interactive citizenship formation where children's agency also plays a part. In a similar vein, the rights-based research often links with previous work in areas such as development studies, peace and conflict research, and post-colonial and migration studies. Thus, the research themes introduced here are both interconnected and intertwined with the more conventional political geography analysis in many ways, showing how developing new insights often draw upon the tradition of the subdiscipline.

## **Conclusions**

This chapter has sought to provide an overview of children's political geographies as a heterogeneous but consolidating area of scholarly activity. While it is feasible to discuss the emerging field in terms of specific search streams there are, of course, many studies that do not easily fall under the ones introduced above. There is interesting work for example on the politics of mobility (Barker 2003, 2012; Kearns and Collins 2003; Benwell 2009; Kullman 2010; Evans 2011), on identity politics related to race, gender and class in everyday communities (Hyams 2000; Morris-Roberts 2004; Van Ingen and Halas 2006; Thomas 2008, 2011; Mitchell and Elwood 2012), and on power relations and political subjectivity (e.g. Cahill 2007; Gallagher 2008; Pike 2008; Häkli and Kallio 2014b).

This said there are some common denominators informing the many differently angled research streams and projects. One broadly accepted view is that, regardless of the empirical focus or the theoretical framework, it is nearly impossible to assess children's lived worlds as neatly structured according to one (or another) scalar logic. The everyday realities of children's lives and the mundane and more formal modes of their politics often appear micro-scalar at the first sight, but contemporary scholarship has shown this to be an oversimplification. Chris Philo and Fiona Smith (2003) were among the first to explicitly discuss the issue, which since has grown into something of a

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common knowledge (e.g. Vanderbeck and Dunkley 2004; Wridt, 2004; Kallio 2007; Ansell 2009). To understand the variable meanings of the everyday it is necessary to retain theoretical open-mindedness towards the many forms, arenas, starting points, and foci of children's political agencies.

We are convinced that the expanding scholarly interest in children's politics will contribute to an enlivened political geography that is able to recognize and discover politics in extraordinary and unexpected places and situations. Rather than contradicting other existing understandings of politics, this approach helps to identify and study events, acts, and contexts that in political analysis are easily bypassed as apolitical. Approaching childhood and children this way, not as exotic issues marginal to political geography but at the heart of its debates, will yield conceptual tools that facilitate theoretical work on the limits and borders of politics also more generally.

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